

Expanding Access to Acupuncture Should Be A Federal Priority

By U.S. Rep. Maurice D. Hinchey (D-NY)

As the recent debate in Congress over reforming managed care and implementing a "Patients' Bill of Rights" has demonstrated, Americans care deeply about the right to choose their health care providers and the ability to control their own medical decisions.

Acupuncture and other complementary medicines should be among the choices available to consumers. Since 1993, I have offered legislation that would make that a reality for the 48 million Americans covered by Medicare and the federal employees' health benefits plan.

Millions of consumers already know how effective acupuncture can be in treating chronic pain, addiction, and respiratory and digestive ailments. More than 40 million Americans regularly use some form of alternative treatment, spending \$27 billion a year. For patients in search of safe, holistic treatments with little or no side effects, acupuncture has become an integral part of their health care regime.

Acceptance of acupuncture is growing among the Western medicine community. A study conducted in California by the Kaiser Foundation in 1998 reported that 57 percent of primary care physicians used or recommended acupuncture. Dr. David Ramsey, who headed a special National Institutes of Health (NIH) panel on acupuncture in 1997, expressed a growing support for acupuncture: "It's time to take it [acupuncture] seriously," Ramsey said. "There are a number of situations where it really does, in fact, work. The evidence is very clear-cut. It has few side effects, and is less invasive than many other things we do." These are strong words for a man educated in the tradition of Western medicine.

Private insurance companies are also waking up to acupuncture, recognizing the growing demand of their customers. An estimated 70 to 80 percent of the nation's insurers covered some acupuncture treatments in 1996, and a growing number offer these benefits without a referral from a primary care physician.

Insurers also recognize that acupuncture can help to rein in soaring health care costs. We have all heard that one of the most important causes of rising health care costs is the increased use of expensive high-tech medicine. Acupuncture is low-tech medicine. It does not rely on expensive equipment or costly drugs. It does not require hospitalization, and can sometimes eliminate the need for surgery.

At long last, the federal government is catching up to this trend and is finally acknowledging acupuncture's benefits. The 1997 panel convened by NIH recognized acupuncture's effectiveness in treating many ailments and urged research into its additional applications, reporting, "The data in support of acupuncture are as strong as those for many accepted Western medical therapies." The NIH also operates a

Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine that will provide \$100 million this year for research and clinical trials, including recent studies on acupuncture's impact on osteoarthritis, alcoholism and addiction, stroke recovery, depression, and dental surgery patients.

In perhaps the most encouraging sign of the acceptance of alternative medicine, the White House has turned its attention to the subject. In March 2000, President Clinton established a White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative Medicine Policy (WHCCAMP) that is due to report in early 2002 on ways to maximize the benefits of complementary medicine - including acupuncture.

My own advocacy for acupuncture and acupuncturists goes back to 1976 when, as a member of the New York State Legislature, I wrote the successful legislation to license acupuncture professionals. At the time, New York was a pioneer in this field. Today, more than 40 states license, certify, or register acupuncture providers.

When I came to Congress in 1993, the Federal Acupuncture Coverage Act was among the first pieces of legislation I introduced. It would require Medicare and the Federal Employees' Health Benefit (FEHB) plan to cover any acupuncture services provided by a licensed, certified or registered professional. If enacted, this legislation would expand access to acupuncture services for Medicare's 39 million seniors and disabled persons and the nine million federal employees and their dependents. More importantly, it could act as a stamp of approval for acupuncture and other alternative treatments, leading to broader access in the private health care market.

I am happy to report that support for my legislation has grown every year. When I introduced the bill, H.R. 747, at the beginning of this Congress, 22 members of the House of Representatives joined me as cosponsors. But it takes much more support than that to get legislation passed.

In order for my legislation to be successful, I need your support. Members of Congress will take action on legislation if they know that there is a base of support among their constituents. Acupuncture providers, patients and advocacy groups that care about expanded access to acupuncture need to tell their U.S. Representatives that they want to see H.R. 747 passed. If this issue is important to you, call, write or email your Member of Congress and ask that he or she cosponsor the Federal Acupuncture Coverage Act. If your U.S. Representative is one of the 22 who have cosponsored the bill, thank them for doing so.

With your help, we can give millions of Americans a real choice in their health care.